

Why Defense Must Change

By Donald H. Rumsfeld

Friday, July 18, 2003; Page A19

Congress will soon decide whether the Department of Defense is to join the rest of the world -- and many newly revamped parts of the federal government, such as the Department of Homeland Security -- in entering the 21st century.

The issue is the Defense Transformation Act, legislation designed to allow the department to, among other things, manage its personnel.

Today it takes, on average, five months to hire a federal employee, 18 months to fire one and collective bargaining with more than 1,300 separate union locals to implement critical reforms. These negotiations can take years to accomplish.

While the nation is asking tens of thousands of reserve troops to leave their jobs and their families to help fight the global war on terrorism, it is estimated that on-duty military personnel are serving in more than 300,000 jobs -- at additional cost to the taxpayers -- that could be filled by civilian workers but are not because the department doesn't have the authority to manage its civilian personnel. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, more than 80 percent of civilians deployed in the theater of operations were contractors. Why? Because a complex web of regulations prevents the Department of Defense from moving civilians to new tasks quickly. As a result, managers turn to uniformed personnel and to contractors to do what department civilians could and should be doing. A similar problem exists with respect to the hiring of new employees. While industry can offer promising applicants a job and a bonus on the spot, all the Defense Department can offer is a ream of paperwork and a promise to get back to them in three to five months.

In an era when our enemies are moving at the speed of satellites, cell phones and cyberspace, these burdensome regulations are not acceptable. The Department of Defense cannot meet the challenges of the future with an organization anchored to the past. We must be permitted to be as agile, flexible and adaptable as the forces we field in battle around the world.

The Defense Transformation Act would help provide the nation with that kind of agility and flexibility.

The new National Security Personnel System the president has proposed would reduce red tape, provide the hiring flexibility necessary to attract the best candidates quickly and competitively, and offer all employees a performance-based promotion system that rewards excellence rather than longevity. Instead of a bargaining process that requires negotiations with more than 1,300 separate local units, the new system would work with

a half-dozen or more national unions, which would retain and protect all the rights of union workers but do so through a more efficient and reasonable process that would not take years to navigate.

Moreover, the new system would not only protect and ensure the fundamental rights of all civilian employees and provide improved opportunities for advancement; it would also likely increase the number of civil service opportunities and make the Defense Department more competitive with the private sector.

But the existing personnel system is not the only problem. Despite 128 studies to reform the department's acquisition process, it now takes the department double the time it took in 1975 to produce a new weapons system -- this in an age when new technologies are coming on line in months, not decades.

Today the Department of Defense uses 1,800 different and antiquated information systems to run its finance and accounting programs, ensuring that timely and accurate business management information cannot be produced.

Current laws and regulations have created a situation in which, to develop and justify a budget, we must employ thousands of people, only a fraction of whom are focused on what is really important -- namely ensuring that the money is spent as Congress and the president determine and that the spending is having the desired results.

U.S. military forces are further hamstrung by outdated environmental regulations that are impeding our ability to train and better prepare the men and women in uniform for battlefield conditions.

These are just a few of the reasons why the Defense Transformation Act is so urgently needed.

Most of the proposals we are making are simple. Over the past months we have addressed most of the problems we have the power to fix. We are reducing headquarters and management staffs, streamlining the acquisition process by eliminating hundreds of pages of unnecessary rules and red tape, and implementing a new business management structure. But most of what remains to be done cannot be done without legislative relief.

Transformation of our military capabilities depends on our ability to transform not just the armed forces and the way they fight. We must also transform the Department of Defense. Congress shares the responsibility to help reach those goals. Passage of the Defense Transformation Act is critical to bringing the department into the information age and the 21st century.

The writer is secretary of defense.